

# MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



Report #55, May-June 1984

## Impact of Childbearing/Childlessness on Women's Lives

This issue of *Report* focuses on one of the most basic issues for women—the impact of childbearing or childlessness on our lives.

The bulk of this issue is taken up with the stories of white middle-class North American Mennonite women—women who have not married, women who have married and have not borne children, women who have married and borne children, women who have married and become mothers without themselves bearing children. Various contributors told me this is the most difficult writing assignment they have ever tackled.

Dorothy Yoder Nyce provides context for our current situation with a lead article on biblical perspectives on

childbearing. Our last *Report*—on Third World women—provided another kind of context.

By sheer coincidence, Germaine Greer's new book, *Sex and Destiny*, provides yet a third context. Our small contribution to this discussion is being released in the midst of much public interest in Greer's assertions—that "Western society has grown fatally indifferent to the values of fertility, motherhood and family" and that "most of the pleasure in the world is still provided by children."

In the midst of all these perspectives, we celebrate our own diverse stories and live out our choices. —Sue Clemmer Steiner, editor

## Childbearing and the Bible: A Dictionary Approach

by Dorothy Yoder Nyce

When asked to prepare an article about biblical material on childbearing, I knew two facts: the topic interests me and the factors are multiple.

Childbearing is affected by marriage practices. With ancient Israel, it conveys basic understandings of corporate personality. It involves preference for sons, uncleanness for women, and Divine action.

Specific Old Testament texts and Jewish commentary on them, New Testament shifts of emphasis, and our own culturally influenced interpretations enter the discussion. We must understand childbearing within a distinct time frame. I chose the format of a Bible dictionary to focus the issues.

### Barren

Fertility was both the expected norm and a great blessing. Barrenness—a dire calamity—could blot out a man's name (Dt. 25:6). To be childless brought reproach on a woman. In fact, if a woman did not conceive within ten years of marriage, the husband could divorce her.

Fertility and barrenness were considered Divine activity. The Deity both opened and closed wombs, depending on a couple's sin (Lev. 20:20-21), or on their

loyalty to the covenant. Hannah's fervent prayer and vow to dedicate her firstborn (I Sam. 1:11) apparently influenced her conception. Rachel's desperate "Give me children, or I shall die" irked husband Jacob. God, not her, was refusing her motherhood (Gen. 30:2).

Barrenness in Bible stories was also affected by potential incest. Israelite organization depended on kinships. To avoid incorrect patterns of relationship (too close or distant), the Divine on occasion intervened. Sarai was Abram's half sister; Rebekkah was a double relative of Isaac; either Rachel or Leah could be "legitimate," not both, because of parental interconnection. Women were crucial to kinship principles of exchange and alliance.

### Birth

"To be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28) was a command taken seriously by Israelites. Yet, lack of birth control or sanitary birthing processes took their toll of mothers and infants. Through risks, laboring women were urged to be courageous (Gen. 35:17-18, I Sam. 4:20), especially if birthing sons.

Considerable folklore surrounded the birthing process. Delivery could be performed on the Sabbath. Scriptures were recited for women in labor—Ps. 20, I Sam. 1, Gen. 21:1-8. Caesarean section delivery was considered unnatural, nullifying privileges and obligations of firstborn infants.

Birth signified Divine presence. The Deity wished to sustain people. People responded by naming sons after the God-name El: Elkanah, Samuel, Daniel, Immanuel. Women were central to sacred activity. Birthing and motherhood claimed intimacy with Yahweh.

### Children—Attitudes Toward

For reasons of continuity, children were welcome in Israel. When a group is struggling to survive, additional numbers spell hope. They suggest the future and reflect God's goodness. They provide adult tasks: fathers to instruct, mothers to teach (Prov. 1:8). Proverbs and short maxims designed to teach moral norms were memorized; older storytellers were listened to with fascination.

However, sons were favored. While girls trained in the Torah were an exception, boys were immersed in it. Newborn sons knew protection through the Shema (Dt. 6:4, 11:13-21). On their eighth day they were circumcised and named. This affirmed Divine covenant through another generation; it prepared boys for future responsibilities in procreation.

Only sons inherited paternal property. Through marriage, daughters were cut off from their family.

### Corporate Personality

For ancient Israel, selfhood was corporate, not individual. The family group in its totality (every person and whatever owned) was fundamental. Representatives spoke or functioned for the whole—for the nation past, present and future. Husbands functioned for wives, children, and slaves—those whose status depended on the group.

This sense of solidarity gave meaning to *one flesh*. With everyone part of one living organism, each claimed corporate bone and flesh. If one of the tribe were killed, corporate "blood was spilt."

### Creation Account Details

All of creation is derived from and dependent on Yahweh the Creator. Gen. 1-3 focuses sexuality, the principle of fertility, and—following disobedience—childbirth accompanied by toil.

Sexuality established an order of differentness within mutuality. Created simultaneously to work or care for the rest of created life, woman and man were each expected to image God. Each completed and needed the other.

The Creator extended to humanity as a whole the power of and responsibility for continued creativity. The Creator wished to sustain humanity. The blessing of fertility met situations of need. But requiring all people for all time to exercise without limitation the capacity to increase *counters* creative care.

That woman's pain or toil will be multiplied in childbirth corresponds to the judgment meted to men in their endeavors. Disobedience caused division. Distinction became opposition rather than pleasure.

### Fertility Goddess

Worship of fertility deities was common in Canaan where the Israelites settled. In their drive to survive as a nation, they patterned neighbors. They looked to the Divine as a partner in fertility.

For Israel and her neighbors, a measure of mystery surrounded sexuality and offspring. Forces operating within the cosmos ensured or countered fertility—human, animal and plant. Whereas some deities needed to be persuaded through magic rites to actualize conception, Yahweh gave the blessing of birth as an act of kindness.

### Firstborn Son

Divine involvement in conception and birth was acknowledged through offering the firstborn son to Yahweh. This act provided a thank offering; it celebrated family life, reminding members of their holy mission as a nation. It anticipated further births.

To fulfill the law—"consecrate whatever first opens the womb"—also dedicated a woman's womb. Woman's sacred task was verified: what had hitherto been closed now had its vocation clarified. Providing the son was born naturally, he was called to Divine purpose. Knowing that no daughter qualified carried unique burdens.

### Levirate Marriage (Dt. 25:5-10)

When brothers dwelled in the same area, and one died without bearing a son, the next brother was to "take" the widow. The first son conceived was then credited to the dead brother "so that his name not be blotted out."

This attests to several facts: 1) childlessness brought shame to a woman, needing a corrective; 2) a married woman was the property of her husband's family group; 3) lineage, not personal affection, shaped marriage; and 4) this practice approved polygamy.

### Marriage

Marriage, the social instrument for preserving clan solidarity, knew ratification through childbirth. Clan needs overshadowed interests of partners. Although there are biblical instances of marital affection (Gen. 24:67, 34:3; Prov. 5:18; Song of Solomon), "the interpersonal relationship was seen from the point of view of fertility...the essential sign of God's blessing."

The Old Testament framework for marriage reinforced patriarchal values and social structures. It preserved the husband's clan, valued mothers for making possible the study of Torah for husband and sons, and approved a double standard—allowing easy divorce for men.

Ancient Near Eastern marriage was a civil event rather than a religious activity. The heads of two families made agreements and exchanged gifts. Girls' prime age for marriage came by twelve and a half years (obvious timing), while men averaged closer to 18. Childbearing demands hardly allowed for young girlhood; child became mother.

## One Flesh

Ancient Israelites understood *flesh* to designate the whole self within kinship. All members of the kinship group shared one flesh. All possessed collective reality.

One flesh signified the solidarity and loyalty of the community. It spoke to indissolubility; a bond could never be obliterated. One flesh could be practiced freely through monogamy or polygamy. Confining the term to sexual intercourse misrepresents ancient thought.

## Polygamy

In order to assure group survival, polygamy was practiced (earliest record—Gen 4:9). In addition to priests having multiple wives and David his harem (I Chron. 14:3), other “exemplary” leaders include Jacob (Gen. 29-30), Gideon (Judges 8:30ff), Elkanah (I Sam. 1:2) and Josiah.

Complications of the normal family with two wives arose when one was disliked, especially if she had birthed the firstborn son (Dt. 21:15ff). Women and children could suffer through multiple arrangements. The number of children born to a woman increased her standing. But mortality rates for both mothers and infants remained high.

## Uncleanness

Causes for an Israelite woman’s uncleanness included: diseases (especially leprosy), bodily discharges, childbirth, contact with the dead and sexual intercourse. The longest period of exclusion from temple involvement followed childbirth (Lev. 12: 2-6). In addition to the seven days of uncleanness associated with every menstrual period (plus five to seven more due to general dread of defilement) the mother experienced 33 days of purification following a newborn son.

If the newborn were a girl, the duration of uncleanness doubled. An assortment of “reasons” is offered for this difference. Perhaps the timing was doubled because girls in turn were capable of bearing children; because of “woman’s heavier share in the first sin,” or because longer abstinence “made the likelihood of more daughters being born less possible.”

To ancient folk, blood was powerful—either as an energizer or pollutant. Known as the life or very soul of a being, it could not be controlled through “normal” channels. Further, mysterious powers affected sexual processes. Limiting the person involved gave “order” to the unknown.

An inconsistency evolved. A new mother was labeled unclean because of her intimacy with the Deity in childbirth. Yet priests (all men)—who surely knew energizing closeness to the Divine through their sacred tasks—therein knew holiness rather than uncleanness....

For women to be excluded monthly from participation in holy activity caused isolation. It enhanced bodily shame. It fostered inferior/superior valuing for wo/men, even amid corporate personality.

## Jesus—Radical Change

Space limits discussion of the radical changes Jesus brought to understandings regarding childbirth. But following Elizabeth’s and Mary’s God-intervened conceptions, no New Testament texts emphasize motherhood as THE definition for women. In fact, Jesus directly countered a woman’s presumption that the uterus and breasts that nurtured him should be glorified (Lk. 11: 27-28).

Jesus saw woman in her wholeness. He rejected the physical dimension as prime. He replaced it with calling women—along with men—to the central task of hearing and doing the Word of God. Without negating the institution of family, he countered its capacity for narrowness and exclusion, its patterns of double standard and discrepancy between women. Jesus called followers to the common human task of birthing children of God, rather than primarily offspring.

*Dorothy Yoder Nyce, Goshen, IN, writes that she is grateful for: “two experiences of rigorous childbirth; the privileges/responsibilities of nurturing and learning from daughters now in grades seven and nine; the conviction that my prime Christian task is to tell the Good News.”*

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Illustration by Ann Graber. Reprinted from *Which Way Women?*

# **The Impact of Childbearing/Childlessness**

## **On Our Lives: Ten Stories**

### *#1—Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus*

While different people have different callings, I have felt that God called me to be a wife, mother, and more.

Grant and I both wanted children. We came from happy, secure homes—he, the fifth of six children and I, the eighth of nine. During our engagement discussions I told Grant I liked the idea of five children for us.

I was 26 when we were married, gave birth to Allen at 28, Eugene at 31, Kathryn at 33, Ruth at 34, Helen at 41.

With the three middle children coming in three years, two months and ten days, we were more than busy. Grant told our friends that 9 a.m. Sunday was the best time to pray for us when all the children (then four) needed help getting ready for church.

The impact of childbearing on my life?

**I was involved in miracles.** As each little one came, I marveled anew at the miracle of birth and the wonder of the human personality. I implored God for wisdom to meet our child's needs.

Each arrival made our home brighter, busier, noisier, our pocketbooks lighter, our lives fuller, richer, better. The more we shared our love the more we had left.

**I saw love catch on.** I remember the squeeze of little arms around my neck, the beautiful bouquets of weeds brought to me. I remember too the childish hurts and tears, as well as my irritations at times. But love was there and love remains.

**I saw children develop.** As they grew, they were alert and curious, learning from everything and everyone around them. Their first attempts at talking were delightful. Their responses to our Bible teaching were exciting.

Their pint-sized church services on the steps were revealing, for example, when a little girl prayed, "Thank you for everyone here, no matter how their faces or clothes look." Their increasing ability to share family work was gratifying. Later, their attempts at thinking and deciding on their own were thrilling, then frightening.

**I was taught.** While we were the children's teachers, they were ours. Their questions made us take a fresh look at our prejudices and beliefs. Their later answers made us review ours.

They taught us more about forgiveness than all the books and sermons in the world. They deepened us—sometimes painfully—in prayer, in faith and also in charity toward all young people.

Their decreasing dependence helped us to see that they belong not to us but to the Lord, not to our generation but to theirs, not to the past but to the future. So soon the children were grown and flown! The

time had come to no longer "command" them but consult with them as adults.

We did not have our children in order to get insights into family living. But they furnished many understandings that were helpful in radio broadcasts and messages in churches and conferences.

In God's providence it was possible for me to be a mother of young children and at the same time have a part-time speaking ministry by 1) an open-door office in our home where I could keep close to the children, 2) good part-time help with housework, and 3) a husband who shared parenting responsibilities and respected my calling at home and beyond.

**I am a part of life's continuity.** Grant has gone to the permanent home in heaven. His name and likeness continue on in our offspring and I am not alone in the world. Our genes are in the eight GRANDchildren. Our five children "look after" me, asking, for example, "Do we have an obedient mother?" when they decide that I should seek medical attention.

The greatest impact of childbearing on my life is my overriding concern that the lamp of faith in Christ may burn brightly from generation to generation until the end of time.

*Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, Harrisonburg, VA, influenced a generation of Mennonite (and other) women with her Heart to Heart radio broadcasts. Her ministry as a preacher and as a counselor and writer on family life themes continues.*

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### *#2—Chris Derstine*

At 29 years of age I am about to give birth to our first child. The full impact of having a child will make itself known to me in the months and years to come. Over the past ten years my attitudes toward having children have shifted to the point where I was able to open myself to this possibility with my fears at a manageable level.

I don't remember if I ever said I didn't want to have children. The issue seemed to be centered on my inability to perceive myself as a mother. Being a mother meant staying at home, having primary responsibility for children, being the housekeeper, having little involvement outside the home. It seemed very lonely, isolated and not suited to my personality. I was scared of being forced into this position because of not having marketable job skills.

Through my job and its challenges and my relationship with my husband, I gained confidence in my own selfworth. Also, I became aware of some of my skills and gifts for the first time.

These changes affected my perceptions of parenting and my own ability to participate in this venture. I

began to realize there are different ways of sharing responsibility in a marriage. I trusted that my husband would not make radical changes and suddenly become very traditional.

We look at parenting as a joint responsibility. I do not think I could face it if I thought it was mine alone, although there are no guarantees that I will always have a partner to share the responsibility (i.e. death, illness, etc.).

One of my biggest fears in becoming a parent is: will I become dependent on my husband, shying away from the challenges that may break with traditional female roles? He is very willing to work halftime and share parenting halftime. I have to decide whether I want to pursue more schooling, or try to secure halftime work that I enjoy.

Parenting is important for both of us and each of us want to share in it. For the first months it will be more my responsibility.

I have not thought of having children as a calling. It is a decision we have made. I am willing to take on the challenges, frustrations and joys that it will involve.

At times, I have despaired of the thought of bringing a child into the world: what kind of future would he/she have? Again, with time this view changed to one of seeing children as hope, a sign of the ongoingness of life.

I am forced to look at the realities of having a child in our culture, and what that means for women: unequal job opportunities, lower pay, lack of daycare, dual roles for working women. I would rather not face these realities, pretend they do not exist. But they do exist and I will be affected by them and hopefully work to help make positive changes.

We anticipate with excitement and some nervousness the birth of our child.

*Chris Derstine, Kitchener, ON, is married to Phil Martin. She is a member of the MCC Women's Concerns Committee and is currently finishing a university degree.*

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### *#3—Helen Lapp*

In a moment when I am not coping well with a three-child household while desperately nurturing my Anabaptist commitments and a latent yearning toward a career, Sam has been known to remind me, "You are the one who wanted children."

It is at least partly true. How well I remember my decision to quit teaching 19 years ago, determined to "relax" in order to more likely become pregnant. Nothing happened for two more years, and the intensity of my desire for motherhood amazes me this side of 16 years of mothering two sons and a middle daughter.

As I look back I want to believe I would have eventually adjusted to life without children and accomplished other satisfying things. How can I know for sure?

As I try to evaluate parenting's effect on my life, I see that it has given me some credibility at church and in the workplace. Others feel at one with me when they learn that I too have weathered diapers, interrupted nights, report cards, swimming lessons, broken bones, and a 16-year-old driver. The list goes on. I constantly draw on my share of these human experiences to establish relationships.

I think I had to know from the inside what most of the human race is feeling. I have had second thoughts along the way. From the best of feminism I have culled much self-understanding. I now tell young mothers that a certain amount of frustration during childrearing is to be expected. It complicates living. Life is at once scarier and ironically more secure.

I remember a frightened moment after my first son's birth when I choked back fears of crib death and wished suddenly I could retreat from opening myself wide to more of life's awful possibilities. But the flip side is that parenting also opens the door to growth amidst pain, and best of all, to watching a child grow and become part of one's buffer against pain.

Humor is part of that safety net. Oh, the family stories we can tell—funny mostly to ourselves. One of many "remember when" tales we love to recount comes from a morning bath scene when David was a screaming infant. Beverly, four at the time, suddenly intervened with a firm "Abracadabra caboom!"—then explained that she was putting David back into my "tummy"!

Having children added unexpected dimensions. One of the more amazing was the request by our local newspaper to allow coverage of our third child's father-attended birth.

The fact that we agreed and that we eventually called the photographer and journalist along with our doctor the morning of the event (and later actually opened the paper to a two-page spread) still surprises us. Maybe having taken the risk to become parents gives courage to risk more.

Sometimes I have retreated from responsibility, however. Children provide the perfect excuse not to teach that Sunday school class or face a hard assignment. And knowing when to say "no" in the best interest of family is just as tricky. I have not always performed a good balancing act.

I am very glad I have three children. So is Sam—most of the time. The verdict isn't all in, but Tony at 16, Beverly at 14 and David at ten appear to our biased view as amazing, wonderful individuals.

Even so, I have recurring difficulty living with my choices. When I wanted children, it never occurred to me that I would someday fantasize about the guru I might have become to generations of English students if only I had become a "doctor" or perhaps an author. I wonder what it would be like to be an authority on something.

I now have a non-career job as events coordinator at a retirement community. Every course I took in college

and every up-and-down of parenting impacts drastically on this assignment.

Some days I look at my life as a generalist and glory that I "can do just about anything" as one of my 91-year-old friends described me recently. There is a self-confidence which comes from risking motherhood.

On other days I sigh and dream about what I might have been. If I were a childless authority on English drama, would my fantasies include a house to clean, three children to feed and clothe and guide? Knowing myself and my restless bent, I think so.

*Helen Lapp, Lansdale, PA, includes teaching high school English and being hostess of an MCC unit in Jamaica among her other life experiences.*

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#### #4—Dorothy Friesen

I am 35 years old, married nine years, and have no children by choice. Gene and I made that decision before we were married and stated it rather categorically then. Now we discuss the possibility annually in terms of our values and goals and where we want to focus our time and energy. I realize I am close to the end of my safe childbearing years, so the question of children feels like an immediate one.

As a girl I observed the difficult lives of women who had children and did all the housework—and vowed I would not get into that position. In the 1950's there seemed to be only two options—spinster missionary to Africa with plenty of exciting adventures and leadership possibilities, OR married housewife with all the accompanying drudgery, compromises and lack of respect.

In the 60's and 70's, marriage without children became an acceptable option at least in North America. I have never felt any pressure from friends or family here, but when Gene and I lived in Asia during the second to fourth years of our marriage, not having children was definitely unacceptable.

Most Filipino couples, no matter how westernized, have a child by the end of their first year of marriage. We were constantly asked why we didn't have children. At first we went into long explanations about how we wanted to spend our time working on justice issues, which then somehow embroiled us in long involved discussions about American childrearing patterns. Why aren't there grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins nearby, friends wondered.

We began to see from a new perspective how deeply the individual profit motive has alienated us in western technologically sophisticated societies.

The nuclear family is the basic economic unit. Children are viewed as the property of parents and thus as their sole responsibility. Committed couples who are able to carry off some kind of halftime work and childcare arrangement are few and far between. In the present economic system and cultural milieu it is not a possible choice for the majority of people....After awhile

we simply said to Filipino friends, "God hasn't blessed us yet."

After having gained an appreciation for children and the extended family in Asia, we vowed to try to live in a somewhat more humane way once we returned to America. We live in a Mexican working class neighborhood where there are plenty of children to relate to. Neighborhood political issues like gangs and quality of education really have to do with struggle with and on behalf of children.

I have also assumed the role of "Concerned Friend"—the Mennonite answer to godparent—for a neighbor child with whose parents we share income and vehicle. This has been an important experience for me. I feel like I have the best of all possible worlds—the joy of participating in the growth and learning and spontaneity of a child and the freedom to continue putting major time and energy into social justice work.

Is childlessness a calling? If calling means—listening to the inclinations deep within about what is necessary for social survival and for personal fulfillment, asking what can I possibly do without—then, yes, childlessness is a calling.

But within is also the sadness which comes from recognizing the irony of trying to work for justice for future generations while not directly participating in producing future generations or nurturing on a day-to-day basis.

Everyone's calling includes struggle. I have chosen to forego the home justice struggle in order to struggle at another point, but always in my mind is the clear interrelationship of home justice and social justice—and a deep admiration for the women willing to take it on.

*Dorothy Friesen is married to Gene Stoltzfus and lives in Chicago. She coordinates Synapses, an organization for international and domestic justice links.*

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*Illustration by Ann Graber. Reprinted from Which Way Women?*



#5—Margaret Loewen Reimer

"Impact" is too objective a word to contain the force with which children came tearing, smashing, exploding into my life. A rather moderate, rational person myself, I have experienced children as the two extremes on life's spectrum.

On the one hand, they have annihilated my order and serenity, sucked my energy and emotions dry, scattered my ambitions and tapped depths of destructiveness in me that I only suspected were there.

On the other hand, they have been my salvation. For a person like me, for whom reason is reality, children are my link with both the primal and the transcendent dimensions of life—they have made me human.

On a day-to-day basis, the first extreme definitely predominates. Although I chose to enter the chaotic-breakfast-table-existence after seven years of marriage, the ambivalence continues. The smothering intimacy of home life brings out the worst in both me and my husband. We crave solitude and silence. Our jobs and our books are priorities for both of us; our temptation is to view children as noisy intruders.

On the other hand, to speak about the burden of coping with children is sheer nonsense. Children are a part of life. To divorce myself from them would be to truncate my own experience of the ongoing universal cycle of birth, reproduction and death—the cycle of past, present and future.

Having children has placed me within this human cycle in a direct way—I know how much easier it would be to focus my attention on the present and on myself. I have been forced to stretch my emotional horizons: much greater anxiety and debilitating frustration, but also vast amazement and unforeseen delight; vulnerability and a knowledge of the fragility of human existence—these experiences have moved me closer to the human family than I was before. (Is this what I Timothy 2:15 is getting at?)

In a sense, my rationalizations here are a reaction against those concerned moderns who ask me whether it is responsible to bring children into a world such as this (as though it is worse than any other), or whether their "calling" excludes the possibility of having children. If one has children, definitely not more than two, I was told. My husband and I decided to have three.

I also react against sentimentalizing one's experience of raising children. I refuse to shrug off, or laugh off, the pain and inconvenience which accompanies that experience; in fact, I am always amazed at how many people risk it.

We risk it, I suppose, because having children is the most hopeful human act we can experience. It is an expression about ourselves (the true consummation of two individuals), about the world (it will continue), and about God (creator and sustainer).

Finally, to dwell on my personal reaction to children, as I have done here, is to submit to a self-indulgence—characteristic of recent generations—which I deplore.

In reality, the three children who have been placed in my temporary care are individual human beings—my subjective response to them is really irrelevant. In fact, it is they who constantly shatter my self-preoccupation and lead me to contemplate the eternal.

Margaret Loewen Reimer, Waterloo, ON, is associate editor of *Mennonite Reporter*.

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#6—Carol Beechy

I am childless. While that is a (largely) voluntary and (largely) positive choice on my part, I find it interesting that there is no way to define the state of being childless except as a lack. And in many ways, describing it as a lack is accurate; it is not merely a quirk of English that so many aspects of creating/conceiving are spoken of in terms of birthing, or that one way of conceptualizing our relationship to God is that of Father/Mother and child.

But the other side of lacking is being emptied and hollow, so that, as Annie Dillard points out in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, we can catch grace as a person fills her cup under a waterfall, so that we can be filled by God. The pit in my life can become a "well of living water," a vessel for God's life and love.

So I rejoice with my friends who have become parents to Alisa through adoption. And I hold Sarah with a touch of possessiveness, because I was a guest—praying and grinning—at her birth, through long hours of labor and the triumph of delivery, finally, kneeling (*guest*—not this time physician—but part of her parents' church).

I relish the times with my nephews, and think delightedly that they will soon be old enough to come and spend parts of summers at Aunt's house in the woods. In that rejoicing and delight, there is mixed some envy and pain that I am not a mother, that I have not and will not experience that intimate twosome, that form of emptying myself for another, that form of being co-creator with God.

There are reminders, of course, that while children "are God's sign of hope in the world," the mother/child relationship is flawed. There is my good friend who was raised in a series of foster homes and orphanages when her alcoholic mother abandoned her, and whose mother now turns to her with impossible demands for mothering.

There are the last two young women with overdoses I took care of, whose small children were left at home, offspring of previous intimacies forgotten in a desperate search for new intimacies—and despair when that seemed thwarted. Or the twins, five pounds and six pounds at six months of age, whose mother had to be reminded (by other mothers on the ward) to breastfeed her children. All the abused, neglected, wounded children.

And I think of some of the women who were powerful creator-forces in my life, in part because they were childless and hence (as Paul put it) less divided in their

attention: Mary Oyer as a creator of a body of believers united in song; Mary Eleanor Bender as a creator of persons able to listen and hear truth in literature; Mary Harnish as a creator of limbs and new life for lepers.

And I remember my astonished delight when strangers came up to me with their five-year-old and said, "Jeremy, this is the doctor who delivered you, and that was one of the most wonderful moments of our lives." Or the fear and trembling with which I approached Caesarian sections as missionary doc, and the joy that even my bumbling attempts brought forth healthy babies with mothers alive to care for them.

And so I turn (partly) my back on my specialty (internal medicine), and get more training in obstetrics so that I can be a good family doctor, and be part of bringing children healthy into the world, and aid, abet, and intervene in their rearing as a physician/friend/aunt/extended family/Christian.

*Carol Beechy is a physician living in Cooperstown, NY. She has also worked at Shirati Hospital in Tanzania.*

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#### #7—Lois Gunden Clemens

Until the age of 43, I lived the life of a single professional woman. My marriage at that age brought many changes into my life. One of these changes was that of suddenly acquiring a ready-made family along with a husband. The family consisted of a daughter, a son-in-law, and an eleven-month-old granddaughter. Thus without having borne children, I immediately moved into the role of grandmother.

Since I had earlier formed a warm faculty-student relationship with my husband's daughter as her college major prof, my continuing relationship with her took on more of the nature of a counselor than that of a mother. But this acquired family has been no less cherished than what I could have experienced had I been our daughter's natural mother.

That is to say that in spite of my not having borne children, the impact of our family relationships over the years has had the effect on me of not seeing myself in the category of childlessness.

In viewing the whole sweep of my life, I feel that I have experienced the best of two worlds. Being a professional single person forced me to develop my personhood and to understand who I was in my own right. It caused me to seek to know my reason for being and to lay hold of opportunities for spiritual growth. This in turn helped me better to understand and to fulfill my calling as a committed Christian.

As a single person I had the freedom to enter into many enriching experiences which would not have been possible had I assumed the responsibilities of being a wife and mother. During the summer vacation months and special leaves of absence from teaching I could participate in various types of service projects at home and abroad. This contributed to my formation as a person, as well as to the expanding of my world. It also

taught me the importance of building caring relationships as the key to a meaningful life.

Then I moved into another world, occasioned by my marriage at the mid-point of my years. This marriage opened up a whole new set of opportunities and challenges. Because of my earlier experiences and because I was now free from a full-time class schedule, there came responsibilities in new areas of service.

This included participation on churchwide boards as well as on conference and congregational committees. These in turn led to other assignments, such as the Conrad Grebel lectures—resulting in weekend lectures in congregations in different areas of the church, as well as the leading of retreats and seminars.

As in the first phase of my life, likewise in the second phase the varied opportunities which were opened up to me have broadened my vision and contributed to my sense of purpose. I am grateful for being able to share in the ongoing work of the church in these ways.

In reviewing the whole sweep of my life and seeing the impact of change through various experiences, I acknowledge the hand of God guiding and leading me step by step. Living in the awareness of His presence in every period of my life has made it possible to live easily with my choices all along the way.

*Lois Gunden Clemens, Lansdale, PA, published her Conrad Grebel lectures under the title Woman Liberated. Before her marriage, she taught languages at Goshen College.*

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#### #8—Anna Bowman

Children are a great joy to observe, a challenge to parent and a rewarding investment. They are also confining, worrisome and very costly. As most things in life, there are pros and cons to having or not having children born to one personally.

I very much enjoy children. I have always been involved in the lives of children and I would find it difficult to imagine my life with only adult persons with whom to interact.

I have never borne a child nor had complete and continuing responsibility for one. I do not feel regret about being childless; in fact, I cannot imagine myself a parent.

Since motherhood is an experience I have never personally had, I cannot evaluate what my life would have been like had I married and borne children or chosen to be a single parent. Certainly, that choice would have made my life very different. Different, certainly, but I cannot believe better.

I have had the freedom to pursue a professional career. I have lived in various places in Canada and the United States. I have ties with family and a variety of friends which have provided close, ongoing relationships with children.



Professionally, I have been part of many, many families. In one work situation I shared legal responsibility with other staff for 20 or 30 children at a time. All these children were "mine" in a very real sense, since decisions I made on their behalf truly had lifelong consequences for them.

I have helped parents and children search for answers, sort out painful feelings, go through difficult life experiences and separations. I have also been part of their experiences of conflict resolution, joyful reunion and growth, learning and life successes.

My life is full of rich experiences with children. I admit pleasure in having a namesake. (I will watch her growth and development with special interest.) Many children have been in my home for an hour, a day, a weekend or even for several weeks. Some came with parents, some by themselves. Each has enriched my life uniquely. I must also admit, however, a certain pleasure when each of these children was claimed by a parent and when each of them went home.

*Anna Bowman, Goshen, IN, is a professor of social work at Goshen College.*

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#### *#9—Joyce Clemmer Munro*

I am childed. That means I live in relationship to a person who is me and who is most certainly not me. It is a condition I experience because I live in the latter half of this century when procreation is a matter of choice, when children often serve as some precious and precarious course to salvation, when having children is an act of hope in the face of some powerful odds. Being childed is the condition of "being with child," postpartum.

Being childed can mean I give everything that is mine to give to this experience—my sleep, my wakefulness, my craving for adult ideas, my marriage, my care about nourishing food. It can mean that I make the change of character necessary in order to give what I don't otherwise have to give—an attempt at these things: patience, calm and sure judgment, self-assured firmness, confidence to thread my way through the possibilities of fulfilling my charge as mother.

When three-year-old Becca plays at being "Mama," she tenderly offers me her breast to nurse, smiles down at me as I pretend to be her infant, and then matter of factly grabs me by the hair to place a pillow under my head. She's a "natural" at her job, so warm I'm sometimes stunned to tears by her tenderness, amazed by her justice when it comes time in our game to punish me.

But there is a difference between us. One element of what informs my behavior is still innocently missing from her play. While her "Mama" acts only according to her instincts and her experience, my behavior as a mother is caused by a third thing—a sense of oughtness I have derived from many sources.

To be childed means I must choose among these sources in order to rear Becca in the way that she should go. To repeat the way Mom and Dad did it? To correct what I think they did wrong in raising me? To second-guess God's regard for the special creation she is? To respect the rules of the pack? To encourage her to become some superhumanly-giving apple pie female? To follow inner directions? To rear her to attempt what I couldn't do?

Yes, yes, yes. Sometimes this parenting aspect of being childed seems overwhelming. So while Becca's mothering is tender and efficient, mine is often ambivalent and inefficient.

To compound this ambivalence is my problem with looking at her as *mine*.... In my best moments I consider her on loan to me. That idea keeps the fear of me as mother in perspective because it inspires the fear of God in me.

The reasons why I had a child are many. The reasons why it took me until the age of 33 actually to have a child are just as many. I resented the argument that endeavors of human service or human artistic expression are just ersatz acts of creation.

I remember the politely silent wishes of one set of parents and the teasingly expressed demands of the other set. I remember how inept I felt trying to fit into my idea of what children wanted from an adult and how I panicked at having to be that person daily. I remember my perennial feeling of always being on the make, so I wondered how I could ever make someone else. I remember how doubtful I was of becoming the parent of some monstrous teenager of the kind I had been (uncommunicative, politely obedient, yet insidiously rebellious).

I can't relate all the reasons I had a child because I don't understand them. I only know that some measure of grief grew in me as I contemplated another woman's happy anticipation of the child in her. The crying inside of me told me something that careful weighing of this procreative choice had never revealed.

Second, it seemed a waste of resources to spend the love John and I had made into a marriage only on vacations, vegetables, friendships, slideshows and other mutual productions. While I doubted my own capability, I saw in him an abundance of nurturing potential that deserve use. Of course, there were children in our lives already as nieces, nephews and others. Yet we were missing something.

In one form this thing is the right to give advice and encouragement when I haven't had experience. At another level it can be called staking a humble claim in human history. I became childed in order to submit to both the bonds and the chains, the incredible joys and griefs of giving and gardening life. One way to respect the gift of life in me was to engender life.

For me, not having a child would have been acknowledging the power of evil in this world—as it is so terribly expressed in the inequitable distribution of wealth and

hunger and in the violence of nuclear power and bombs. So being childed by Becca is banking on the "evidence of things not seen."

Then there is a final reason...When Becca tells me she's sad because the clouds are weepy (but we both can see that the sun is shining brightly), or when she concludes at the end of a long discussion that her friend Henner will be "almost a woman" when he grows up, I know why I am childed.

The world desperately needs...I need...a child's view of life. Because becoming like a child—having that perspective—is the only way to enter the Kingdom. So, being "Mama" for me, regardless of how inherently good or bad I am at that or how I respond to the pressures of this career, is one awful way of loving God.

*Joyce Clemmer Munro, Harleysville, PA, is a freelance writer and publicist.*

#### #10—Sue Clemmer Steiner

After nine years of marriage, my husband and I made a more-or-less permanent decision to not have children. Even now I find it difficult to talk and write about this—to "admit" that our situation is the result of a deliberate choice....

After we made that decision, I found that my life could not remain the same. Over the next two years I left my long-term job as a book buyer and went to seminary. Presently I work half-time as a youth minister. I also teach "religious knowledge" to teenagers at our local Mennonite high school, and usually have various freelance writing projects going.

I have never understood the argument that those of us who choose not to have children are selfish. When I second guess our decision, I find that I want children for reasons that seem self-indulgent to me. I want them so I won't be left stranded and lonely in my old age. I want them because I don't want to miss any of the joys of life. I want them so I won't have to struggle so hard to stay connected to "life"—especially the life of the next generations.

Our decision to not have children attests to several things. It attests to the importance for me of working in the public churchly arena—that much, I believe, is part of my calling. It attests also to my high view of the role of parents—I remain childless not because I downgrade the significance of parenting, but because I believe that the proper nurture of children is incredibly important.

Perhaps biology is destiny. Or at least I think of much of what I do in imagery related to the birthing process. A writer, says Madeleine L'Engle, is a co-creator with God. That's how I see my writing.

A youth minister, says James Kolar, is a birth coach or midwife, one who helps young persons struggle to give birth to all sorts of new life. That's how I see my youth ministering. (If I care this much about what's happening to this kid right now, I sometimes think to myself—

when my role is "just" that of coach—how could I possibly stand to be this kid's mother?)

As a long-time married person without children, I seem to inhabit a never-never land between the world of parents and the world of single persons. My situation puts me closer to the experience of single persons in the church; I glimpse their sense of often "not fitting" in a world of families. And I get a bit tired of people assuming I'm five or ten years younger than I am—but how else can they make sense of the fact that I don't have children "yet"?

An important book for me has been *Partnership, Marriage and the Committed Life* by Edward Dufresne (Paulist, 1975). Dufresne reverses our usual expectations and calls marriage an *alternate* lifestyle of commitment—alternate to the single life. He then talks about shaping the kind of marriage that is right for our individual and dual Christian commitments.

I propose that a marriage without children can be one *alternate* lifestyle of commitment. The possible experiences missed—the joys/struggles/sorrows traded off—are hardly the point. The point is—am I part of a lifestyle of commitment—to the church, to my spouse, to the ongoingness of life? I believe I am.

*Sue Clemmer Steiner, Waterloo, ON, is editor of the CWC Report.*



### Did You Know That?...

Among parents in the U.S., the two most commonly cited advantages of having children are 1) love and 2) the stimulation and fun children provide.

Women cite primary group ties, affection and attaining adult status (upon becoming a parent) as advantages of having children. Men are more likely to emphasize carrying on family traditions, the achievement of parenting and pride in children's accomplishments as the advantages of being a parent.

Black women mention stimulation and fun by children less often than white women. In the U.S., religious obligations to have children, restrictions on parents, and anticipated economic assistance were related to family size preferences among women, while love and continuing the family name mattered among husbands.

From "Essentials of Adolescence," Vol. 10, No. 3, March 1984.

## Reflections...

by Doris Gascho

*Mennonite Leadership Polity Consultation, Lockport Mennonite Church, Stryker, Ohio, April 9-11, 1984.*

About 100 persons gathered to work at stage two of the **Leadership and Authority in the Life of the Church** document adopted by the Mennonite Church at Bowling Green in 1981.

Goals for the consultation, initiated by the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, included: 1) shared worship and fellowship; 2) examining (and hopefully coming together on) congregational leadership models; 3) a look at relationships between congregation, conference, and denomination; and 4) confirming and selecting leaders.

Five conferences sent women delegates, and six women from boards and agencies participated. Pauline Kennel, Chicago Area Ministries Coordinator, led in three worship events. She wove together litanies, responsive readings, faith stories, hymns, rounds and Scriptures in beautiful and challenging ways.

Participants grouped nine to a table for the discussion of five papers: Leadership and Authority Observations (Ralph Lebold), a Model for Congregational Leadership (Duane Beck), Congregational-Conference-Denominational Relationships (Irvin Weaver), a Model for Confirming Leadership (Paul M. Zehr), and Criteria for Selecting Pastoral Leaders (Herb Schultz). From each table a recorder reported areas of agreement, disagreement, and more areas for work.

Although a minority of women were present, our presence and participation were not without significance. Whether as members of boards, pastors, or laypersons, we together helped focus the issues from another perspective at various points.

Joy Lovett, for example, guided the shaping of wording in a reference to minority groups; Emma Richards,

chairperson of the Committee on Women in Leadership Ministries, tested the understandings of the gathered body on the place of women in ministry.

Several women were appointed as reporters for their table group. While this role is sometimes viewed as a put-down, it nevertheless carried a substantial role in this particular consultation. I chaired a table group. In lunch and supper conversations with other leaders we shared perceptions, discussed our individual settings, and contributed to the general giving and receiving of counsel and information in an atmosphere of mutuality and excitement.

Because of the presence of women the group singing had a better balance of voices; the tensions were sometimes broken by gentle women's humor; the focus of wording became more inclusive with the presence of women concerned for wholeness as a church.

The atmosphere was one of working alongside, of clear articulation where concerns for inclusiveness were at stake, and a sense of patient compassion where we sharply disagreed. Attitudes of distrust and of theological difference focused more clearly in issues other than male-female discussion—for example, in concern for how process could best take place.

It may be innate optimism, but my reading of the sense of the gathered leaders—both men and women—would echo David Thomas' comment to Emma Richards in the assembled body, "We haven't arrived, Emma, but we're on the way!"

*Doris Gascho, Kitchener, ON, recently completed a term as chairperson of the Personnel Committee of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec.*

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## News and Verbs

**Anne Wilson Schaef**, author of *Women's Reality*, and **Linda Mercadante**, author of *From Hierarchy to Equality* were the featured speakers at a symposium on "Women: Psychology and Theology" held in Fresno, CA April 5-6. Eighteen workshops focused on topics such as depression, rape, female/male teams in the workplace, poverty, power and conflict. 250 mental health workers, ministers, social workers and others attended.

Three female speakers have been announced for the XI Assembly of Mennonite World Conference, Strasbourg, France, July 24-29. A team of three persons will deliver a message entitled "God's People Serving" on Friday, July 27. Two of them are women—**Georgine Boiten du Rieu**, pastor, social worker and city mission worker in Amsterdam; and **Elke Hubert**, social worker in Ingolstadt, West Germany. **Emma Richards**, Lombard, IL,

will preach one of two Sunday morning sermons—"What Mean These Stones?"

**Carol Ann Weaver**, composer and pianist from Waterloo, ON, premiered her new work *Afterday* with three other artists on March 29 in Waterloo. This 15-minute work with music, visuals, and sung and spoken poetry focuses on several war-versus-children, war-versus-innocence situations. In addition to **Weaver** on electric piano and tape deck, the performers included visual assemblage artist **Susan D. Shantz**, soprano **Iraina Neufeld**, and reader **Kathryn Zinger**. Poetry woven into the piece was by **Judith Miller** and **David Waltner-Toews**.

The first issue of a new publication—*PMC: The Practice of Ministry in Canada*—includes an article on "Women in Ministry" by **Glenys Huws**, co-deputy secretary of the United Church of Canada's Division of Ministry

Personnel and Education. Here are some of the findings from a two-year study of women in the "ordered" ministry which she coordinated: 1) women reported receiving less support than men from their families and congregations during preparation for ministry; the support of *friends* was, however, significant; 2) the time spent in theological training was more a time of testing vocation for women than it was for men; 3) 40% said that their decision to pursue a church vocation was influenced by women already involved in ministry; 4) respondents felt that women students should have a female supervisor during summer placements or internship.

The Third World Women's Project of the Institute for Policy Studies sponsors dynamic Third World women to come to the United States to speak on socio-economic justice and women's issues in the Third World. The visitors for the fall of 1984 are **Marta Benavides**, who worked with Archbishop Oscar Romero and in social services in El Salvador and currently coordinates Medapaz in the U.S., and **Irene Santiago**, a Filipino woman who does community work with low-income tribal women in the Philippines. Women's groups and peace organizations are invited to sponsor the visit of Marta or Irene to your community. For details, contact the Institute for Policy Studies, 1901 Que Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009, (202) 234-9382.

Approximately \$7,000 has been received to bring Third World women to Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in July 1984. Executive Secretary **Paul Kraybill** reports that travel costs average \$1,500 per person and that 12 women have been selected for sponsorship by MWC travel funds. These include **Victoria Vargas** (Costa Rica), **Juana Garcia** (Cuba), **Kafutshi Kakesa** (Zaire), **Leah Sonwani** (India), **Marta Quiroga de Alvarez** (Argentina), **Milka Rindzinski** (Uruguay), **Margaret Devadason** (India), **Erlinda de**

**Rovelo** (Honduras), **Eligia Murcia** (Colombia), **Takako Yanada** (Japan), **Severina Jimenez** (Bolivia), and **Hannah Joseph** (India). Kraybill expresses gratitude for all contributions to this effort. Donations are still welcome and should be sent to Mennonite World Conference, 528 E. Madison St., Lombard, IL 60148, designated for Third World women's travel to MWC.

About 200 people attended the 7th Women in Ministry Conference, held May 3-6 in Harrisonburg, VA. **Virginia Ramey Mollenkott** captivated the participants with her three presentations on the image of God and humanity and ministry in the image of God. **Nancy Kerr**, **Joy Lovett** and **Virginia** shared their life stories during worship sessions. **Juliet Wiebe's** sculpture depicting women, trees and a clothesline served as a centerpiece stimulating reflection in the assembly hall throughout the conference. Twenty-seven artists contributed their works to the display in the foyer and corridors of Harrisonburg Mennonite Church, which hosted the conference. Over 20 workshops were offered. The many women and men from the Harrisonburg area who planned and led the conference are to be highly commended. **Emma Richards** volunteered to coordinate planning for the next conference, with Colorado, California or Chicago as possible locations. A more detailed report on the conference will be printed in the next issue of *Report*.

**Florence Li Tim Oi**, ordained as priest in 1944 in the Anglican Diocese of Hong Kong, celebrated the 40th anniversary of her ordination in Westminster Abbey on January 25. She was the first woman ordained priest in the Anglican communion. —From *Christian Century*.

Forthcoming *Reports* will focus on:

July-Aug. 1984 Friendship and Community  
Sept.-Oct. 1984 Women and Poverty  
Nov.-Dec. 1984 Women and Body Image

*REPORT* is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Sue Clemmer Steiner, Apt. 3, 87 Westmount Rd. North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 5G5.

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